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ABSTRACT

The 1980s can be a great decade for the fine arts in higher education if students and administrators are offered a well-designed combination of interdisciplinary study and employment opportunities. A statement of goals for the arts should give high priority to maintaining quality, encouraging innovation and flexibility, and using resources effectively. Obstacles to overcome in the efficient administration of interdisciplinary studies include (1) designing quality courses, (2) maintaining cost effectiveness, (3) acquiring full administrative support, and (4) increasing the job opportunities of fine arts graduates. A cooperative or experiential fine arts interdisciplinary program provides employers with a good source of labor and the opportunity to preview potential employees, and it establishes goodwill ambassadors through students returning to campus. Benefits to students include the opportunity to test career aptitude and interest, on-the-job experience, development of professional skills, and the acquisition of contacts to use as references after graduation. (AEA)

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OUT OF THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE:

Administering Interdisciplinary Fine Arts

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the annual convention of the

American Theatre Association

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OUT OF THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE:

Administering Interdisciplinary Fine Arts

In the 1980's, "readin', ritin', and rithmatic" will be replaced by three new R's: reduce, reallocate, and retrench.[1] The higher education analysts tell us schools will close their doors, tenure will become more difficult to obtain, faculty mobility will decline, and students will be recruited like blue chip basketball and football stars. Some of these analysts contend the 80's will be the "Golden Age of the Student."[2] Can the "Golden Age of the Student" be translated into a new Golden Age for the Arts? I feel the 80's can be a truly great decade for the arts.

Department chairmen and faculty in the arts, especially theatre, live by the saying: "Ours is not to reason why, ours is but to do or die." If we spend all our time fretting about what the experts do or do not say about enrollment trends, we will die! Let's "do" something, particularly in theatre.

How do we do it in the age of the new R's? We do it with quality! We must offer students and central administration a skillfully woven tapestry of interdisciplinary study and employment opportunities. Yet, we will clearly fail if we only manage to offer a patchwork quilt.

The facts are that our total faculty will not grow to any significant degree (unless the growth is at the expense of other departments or program options within our own departments). Further, program options will not increase dramatically, but the strength and quality of programs in

the arts can dramatically increase with true interdisciplinary (IDC) thrusts. How can this be the case? When we examine a list of imperatives for colleges and universities outlined in the January 28th issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, we find the answer. Three of the imperatives speak directly and eloquently to the arts:

1. Give high priority to the maintenance of quality. This includes insisting on quality in teaching, improving the achievement capacities of our graduates, and maintaining the distinctive characteristics of our institution;
2. Encourage innovation and flexibility. Do this by developing a curriculum that is sensitive to change, but also places emphasis on general education, and by encouraging new programs, as well as instructional techniques; and
3. Strive for the most effective use of resources.[3]

Have you ever seen a better statement of goals for the arts? It is obvious to me that IDC, when well done, can help institutions of higher education adequately address the problems of the 80's and fully respond to the imperatives listed above.

Courses and approaches similar to those outlined by Sue Cole [4] and Mark Malinauskas[5] offer high quality, innovative, flexible programming with effective use of resources. The answer to the declining enrollment challenge of the 80's must be a retort characterized by high quality programming. The challenge of the 80's must not be met by diluted programs which only offer faddish, high student appeal courses; it must be met with programs of the highest quality. It seems obvious and is clearly underscored by Cole and Malinauskas that cleverly conceived and effectively

executed interdisciplinary fine arts courses supply an integral frame in the film of the complete fine arts curriculum.

However, our primary concern in this paper centers on the major obstacles to the efficient administration of IDC and ways to overcome the obstacles.

The most often mentioned hurdle, already alluded to, concerns the quality of IDC offerings. We ask what should be taught, to what audience, through what medium, and by which teachers. The papers by Cole and Malinauskas detail exceptionally high quality course plans which answer these specific questions. IDC offerings must teach the students to experience the arts (not just appreciate them), be directed at the general education population (not a select few who have declared an interest in the arts), employ an effective medium (not just a cost effective one), and utilize our most effective and most vital teachers (not the graduate student or the associate professor who retired with the granting of tenure). In the final analysis, though, quality is not just an institutional problem; it is a problem for the discipline. What should the role of the American Theatre Association be in determining the nature and content of IDC? This question must be addressed by the ATA leadership in the early 80's.

Even if our goal is to deliver all IDC through the most effective medium, we can not ignore cost effectiveness, our second most pressing problem. The 80's will be academically painful. We must develop courses which can be effectively taught with large numbers of students, offer courses which have traditionally lower enrollments less frequently, develop arts courses which have particular relevance to the arts audiences served by our institution, and see that our institution gives proper credit

for creative activity which goes beyond lip service for release time. In short, we can be cost effective; we must be. The argument that the arts are expensive and that we must have small classes to do an effective job will no longer stand alone. While the argument is as valid as ever, it must be bolstered by cost effective corollaries.

A third problem can be the most crippling of all for IDC--lip service support by a dean, a vice-president, and/or a president. In order for IDC to truly succeed, 100% support is required. At the outset, not everyone must have the same degree of commitment; however, before significant resources are devoted to any IDC project, all levels of administration must want future efforts to succeed. There appears to be no way to guarantee good faith and cooperation.

The optimum plan for assuring full and genuine administrative support will vary from one institution to another. Your plan might be similar to the one which follows:

1. Plan a quality course, outlining the best course you can conceive with resources available at your institution and those obtainable from extramural sources. Detail the resources necessary to teach the course effectively in terms of staffing, equipment, as well as operating expenses;
2. Obtain a written commitment from various administrative levels supporting a pilot program, granting the staff and necessary funds. (It is a waste of time to do even a pilot course without a commitment in writing.)
3. Pilot the course, keeping detailed records of content and activities, as well as collecting very specific feedback on the course; and

4. If you get to this stage, set up for a full run of the course. Be sure that there is a specific commitment in writing from central administration to assure the course will have proper staffing and funding for a specified period of time and that the course is re-examined periodically to see that it is still doing the job intended. Again, obtain a written commitment from central administration. More and more it seems that verbal agreements are no agreements at all.

A fourth problem, which I perceive as being one of our most pressing problems, arises out of the "get me a job" rush of the 80's. Each year, more theatre majors at Murray State University say, "I want to major in theatre, but I have to major in an area that will get me a job." If theatre majors are to survive along with business majors, direct confrontation is required. How can we increase the employability of arts students and use IDC as a part of our plan? In order to increase the chance for jobs, our students must increase their flexibility; rather than their specialization. This can be facilitated by two non-traditional activities: (1) interdisciplinary fine arts courses; and (2) experiential education. The blending of IDC and experiential education, cooperative education or internships, can be our greatest hope for the future. IDC increases the students' understanding of the interdependence of the arts which, in turn, increases their attractiveness as employees in a variety of jobs calling for people with creativity and flexibility.

Through experiental education, both the student and employer learn the direct value of arts training, we build a ready-made outlet for our graduates, we have an opportunity to expand the service mission of our

institution, we promote the arts as being practical, and we build better relationships with our local, state and regional arts organizations.

Murray State University has designed a program to help prepare students for careers and we plan to take greater advantage of it in the future. Murray State is one of three schools in the nation to have an in-depth "co-op" program, open to any student in any field of study.

Murray has adopted a one-calendar-year experience cycle for its cooperative program. Basically, the cycle provides for up to two years of work experience in a five-year degree program. The first year of cooperative education begins at the end of the sophomore year, the second year falls between the junior and senior years. Their philosophy is that the student should be paid a fair wage. We have some trouble with this in the arts, but all students receive two semester hours credit for each semester they are working.

The director of Murray's cooperative education program outlines the following benefits for the employer and the student:

1. The Murray State University cooperative education program offers employers these benefits:
   a. A good source of labor;
   b. The combination of the two steps of recruiting and training at a lower cost;
   c. The opportunity to preview potential full-time employees;
   d. Participation in the educational and on-the-job training of a student;
   e. An opportunity to release high-salaried employees for other work; and

f. Establishment of goodwill ambassadors through students returning to campus.

2. The cooperative education plan at Murray State provides the student with these benefits:

   a. Testing of career aptitude and interest against practical job requirements before graduation;

   b. Addition of a special dimension to classroom instruction through on-the-job experience and training;

   c. Development of self-confidence, maturity, professional skills, and improved understanding of human relations;

   d. Earnings to help defray college expenses; and

   e. A professional contact which may be used as a reference or may lead to employment after graduation.[6]

Our students in Speech and Theatre attest to the truthfulness of these claims. For example, we have a graduate student in speech who has just completed a year of co-op experience in city government and will return to complete his course work for the master's degree this fall. In addition, two of our undergraduates have worked for a professional theatre in Chicago through the cooperative education program.

Cooperative education definitely has appeal for the arts. It is even possible that the American Theatre Association can help develop a national network of co-op outlets.

In the final analysis, the four administrative problems I have described are not unique to IDC. However, I do feel IDC can help answer those problems for the 80's and beyond. Of equal or greater importance is the development of extensive co-op experiences for theatre students. After all, ours is but to do or die!

ENDNOTES

[1] Vernon W. Gantt, "The Administrator's Three R's for the 80's," a paper presented at the Southeastern Theatre Conference, Nashville, Tennessee, March 1980.

[2] Malcolm G. Scully, "Carnegie Panel Says Enrollment Declines Will Create a 'New Academic Revolution'," The Chronicle of Higher Education, Vol. 19 (January 28, 1980), p. 11.

[3] "Meeting the Problems of the Next 2 Decades: A Checklist," The Chronicle of Higher Education, Vol 19 (January 28, 1980), p. 9.

[4] Sue Cole, "Theatre: A Portmanteau for the Arts," a paper presented at the Southeastern Theatre Conference, Nashville, Tennessee, March 1980.

[5] Mark Malinauskas, "Interdisciplinary Arts: The 80's and Beyond," a paper presented at the Southeastern Theatre Conference, Nashville, Tennessee, March 1980.

[6] "Cooperative Education," a brochure published by the Office of Cooperative and Experiential Education, Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky (1977), p. 2.